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Bill would give state DUI law a national reach

Monday, August 01, 2005

STAFF AND WIRE REPORT

A New Jersey law inspired by the death five years ago of Navy Ensign John Elliott was included in the federal transportation bill passed by Congress last week.

The legislation, which President Bush has promised to sign, provides federal grants to encourage states to enact John's Law, which gives police the authority to impound the vehicles of people arrested for drunken driving.

"This comes at a time very significant to us," Elliott's father, William, said yesterday. "The pain never goes away, the loss never goes away. It's one of those bittersweet occasions that is a victory."

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After his son's death, Elliott, who lives in Egg Harbor Township, lobbied politicians in Trenton to pass two bills for his son. The first was the car impoundment law; the second allowed police to keep drunken drivers in

custody until they sobered up.

John Elliott, who had just graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, was killed July 22, 2000, in Pittsgrove, Salem County, by a drunken driver who had been arrested earlier in the evening, then released.

The driver, Michael Pangle of Woodstown, was also killed. Three hours after his arrest, Pangle, while still intoxicated, was released to the custody of a friend. The friend took Pangle back to his vehicle.

Police said Pangle got back into his Chevy Blazer and started to drive home. While traveling west on Route 30 in Pittsgrove, Pangle's SUV clipped a passing trailer and then hit Elliott's car head-on. Both were killed instantly.

Under the new federal legislation, states could enact John's Law to help them meet a set of criteria necessary to win federal drunken-driving prevention and other law enforcement grants.

John's Law was introduced in Congress by Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) and Rep. Frank LoBiondo (R-2nd Dist.)

"In New Jersey, John's Law has saved lives and become an important tool for law enforcement," Corzine said in a statement Friday, after Congress passed the bill.

Elliott, who founded a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting designated driving and tougher drunk driving laws, said he hopes the legislation will ultimately save lives.

"We didn't want John's death to be in vain," Elliott said. "We've been working on this bill for two years, and it wasn't easy. But it is a fitting tribute to his memory."

Staff writer Sulemon Din contributed to this report.

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